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Family Separation and Reunion

Families of Prisoners of War and
Servicemen Missing in Action

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Children in Limbo

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Introduction

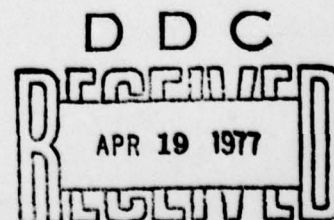
The absence of father caused by his assignment to military combat in a foreign country, presents some difficult problems for any child. When a father is missing in action (MIA) or a prisoner of war (PW) there are the additional burdens for the child, and mothers must not only cope with their own problems and feelings but also with those of their children during the prolonged and indeterminable period of the father's absence.

There is a paucity of research attempting to answer questions surrounding a child's adjustment to and his perceptions of a father missing in action or a prisoner of war. Although the adjustment of children of PW/MIA families was emphasized and described by McCubbin, Hunter, and Metres (1973) in their report of a world-wide study of PW/MIA families of the Vietnam Conflict, their data were based primarily on the mother's perceptions of the children's problems, needs and feelings. The number of children interviewed personally for that study was small however, and precluded meaningful conclusions. In a recent report by Hall and Simmons (1973) an attempt was made to describe aspects of the child's role in the emotional adjustment of PW/MIA mothers. Here again no direct assessment of the children was made nor was there any attempt to explore fully the nature of the children's behavior. It should be noted that lack of knowledge about the children's reactions to father absence may be attributable in part to the mother's desire to protect her children from the trauma of dealing with father's absence and

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also to the disquieting nature of the subject which brings with it an awareness of the children's vulnerability. Additionally, the child's emotional reaction to father's absence, the realization that a child desires to maintain high hopes for father's return, as well as the realistic limitations of therapeutic intervention in such situations often inhibit the involvement of mental health professionals. The importance of understanding children in this unique situation, however, cannot be ignored.

Problem

For the purpose of this presentation, the child is seen as involved in a cumulative family crisis. The child plays his part in the family's effort to resolve the crisis and to maintain family stability. The child, in turn, is affected by the community's attitudes towards the war and the family. His behavior is also influenced by a number of other factors — by his own personality, by his relationship with peers and their expectations, by mother's attitude and behavior, by the roles he plays in the family, as well as by the family's solidarity and self-sufficiency. Ordinarily, while in a crisis situation such as a death in the family, members may draw on cultural definitions of appropriate behavior which can lead to a personal resolution of the crisis. However, this is not so for the family having a father as a prisoner of war or missing in action.

The military's view of how the family should behave has been made clear — it is in the best interest of the father that the family do all that is necessary to maintain stability, unity and solidarity. But, for the family which has to face not only the day to day crises, but also make necessary legal, personal, emotional and social adjustments without a father, what should be done to preserve the family's future is less clear. Information to assist families has been primarily administrative in nature and of minimal value as specific guidelines for coping with total family adjustment. Thus, the PW/MIA family and, in particular, its children, is faced with an unstructured situation and must discover the techniques for handling this position through the process of trial and error.

The basic question as to how children should react to a situation in which father's fate is unknown is, at best, controversial. Grieving is the most common concept used when describing children's reactions to father separation. However, the published reports by McCubbin et al. (1973) and Hall and Simmons (1973) allude to child adjustment but do not reference the grief reaction. The literature is neither clear nor uniformly consistent on the subject. Bowlby (1960)

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mentioned the existence of the psychological processes of mourning even in young children experiencing separation. On the other hand, Freud (1943) and Deutsch (1937) in their studies of children separated from fathers during World War II emphasized that children for their own protection are not likely to grieve as adults do. A search for the usual symptomatology of grief, such as anger, somatic distress and guilt, is not likely to produce meaningful information. The most viable proposition which seems applicable to PW/MIA children is offered by Hilgard, Newman and Fisk (1960) who pointed out that children who lost their father before nine years of age displayed extreme sensitivity to their mother's reaction to the loss, rather than displaying a personal grief.

Purpose

The present paper is based on a study initiated by a concern with children's reactions to the absence and in some cases, the return of a father missing in action or a prisoner of war. The study was conducted by the staff of the Family Studies Branch of the Center for Prisoner of War Studies in an attempt to understand these reactions and to determine whether mental health intervention might be beneficial in such situations.

Procedure

Data were obtained from group discussions with children of servicemen who were listed as missing in action, or prisoners of war, or of recently returned prisoners (RPW) of the Southeast Asian conflict. The sample included children of families in attendance at three of the five week-long religious retreats sponsored by a nonprofit organization.¹ Of a possible 75 families² with children who were in attendance, 65 mothers were willing to have their children participate. A total of 124 children were involved in the group discussions; eight of those children were from families where the father had returned (RPW).

For each retreat the children were separated into four age groups: 3-6 years, 7-9 years, 10-13 years, and over 14. The groups engaged in discussion periods of up to one hour with the exception of the 14 and over group, which was scheduled for 3 hours of discussion.

1. High Flight Foundation sponsored an all-expense paid religious retreat program for families of returned prisoners of war, missing in action, and listed prisoners of war. The retreats were held in Estes Park and Granby, Colorado during the period of 16 June through 27 July 1973. The Foundation is under the leadership of astronaut Jim Irwin and Dr. Bill Rittenhouse.

2. All branches of the Armed Services were represented: 10 percent were Marine Corps families, 20 percent were Army families; 30 percent were Navy Families, and 40 percent were Air Force families.

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This paper will primarily emphasize the findings derived from the discussion group for the 14 year olds and over since their reactions and comments were representative of the other groups, but seemed to present a greater depth of feelings.

The children's discussion groups were scheduled as integral parts of the retreat program; the children were invited to attend and were informed that the topic of father absence would be discussed. The groups were led by a team of behavioral scientists³ skilled in group counseling, with ministers and youth counselors as support personnel. The discussions were semi-structured and primarily focused upon three major themes: (a) the children's perceptions of father's absence, (b) their feelings about father's absence, and (c) their perceptions of their mother's adjustment.

Findings

Coping with the Unknown. All of the children involved in the group discussions expressed initial reservations about discussing father and his absence. However, the conditions surrounding father's casualty were familiar to each and served as a legitimate point of departure for reflecting on father's loss. The ring of the doorbell, men in uniform, mother's crying, sadness in the home and the news of father's casualty were vividly described by the more articulate children, while others nodded tearfully in agreement with the close similarity to their own personal experiences. Like a casualty report, the children read the personal "facts" to each other.

Father's absence from the home was unquestionably real. As the children shared experiences and notes, however, little else remained clear. Is he alive? Was he killed immediately? How much hope can we continue to keep? What else can we do? Do we have all the information about him? The children expressed frustration with the lack of more definitive information as to the fate of their fathers. As if to present their mother's position, some children were able to relate what seemed to them to be gaps in the information they did receive. One child, after describing how his father had been on a patrol which received heavy enemy fire, and how the report of casualty revealed little other than the fact that a return sweep of the area was unable to produce a trace of his father, still was able to say, "I feel he is alive."

3. The team consisted of a psychiatrist, three psychologists, two social workers, and three ministers with the support of three youth counselors on the staff of the High Flight Foundation.

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For the MIA children, father's future became more questionable and their perceptions, hopes and fantasies less clear as the children discussed the recent return of American prisoners of war. Operation Homecoming⁴ symbolically represented two seemingly conflicting points of view. On one side of the coin, it meant that all the children, RPW and MIA alike, had reason to be extremely happy and proud. After all, they, along with their mothers had hoped and prayed for this event, and most families took an active part both locally and nationally in the effort to bring the men home. On the other side, however, Homecoming presented a threat to the hopes and fantasies of the MIA child about father's return. Did the return of American PWs mean that the remaining fathers would definitely not return? How should they feel and how should they now act? Wasn't it time for them to prepare for their own future without father, or work harder and make a greater commitment to account for father's loss? The questions were posed and seemingly acknowledged by all the children, but the answers were left for each to resolve at his own pace.

With this brief but meaningful introduction to the questionable nature of father's return, the children seemed to recognize the acceptance and understanding within the group. The group became an acceptable setting in which the children could discuss more personal feelings and seek opinions and impressions. It should be noted, however, that the group experience itself played a minor role in creating this impression of "being a safe place". The atmosphere of the total retreat and the opportunity to share similar experiences with other children who "really understood" because they had been through the same struggle set the stage for the discussion. The children provided each other with mutual support, without any attempt to attenuate the free expression of pain, hurt and frustration which had accumulated over the months, and in most cases, the years of waiting and uncertainty. As the discussions continued, the children began to express personal beliefs. For some, there was no question in their minds that their father would not return, that he had died in Southeast Asia.

Given the facts surrounding the casualty, the negotiations and cease-fire, and finally, the return of the American PWs, the children felt that the prospect of their father's return was realistically questionable. This position was not presented to the group without associated expressions of guilt, self-doubt, and the need for accept-

4. Operation Homecoming was the name given to the total plan for processing of returned American prisoners of war in February and March of 1973.

ance by the other group members. The twenty-one-year-old daughter of an Air Force pilot, missing in action, after documenting why she believed her father died, also expressed how uncomfortable it was for her to feel this way: "Somehow I feel I am letting my father down by not doing everything possible for him. I feel guilty for not keeping the hope alive. I still hope that he will come back, but I have to get on with my life." The group members responded to this expression of honesty and discomfort with personal acknowledgment of similar feelings. "My father would not want me to think about him this way. He would want me to get on with my life and not wait for him. He loves me and would have encouraged me to become someone. He would not want to hold me back."

Any discussions of the possibility that some fathers would not return was interpreted by some children as an outright challenge and a threat to their personally held belief that their father was still being detained as a prisoner. Hope for them had to be maintained in spite of any facts to the contrary. As long as there was any discrepancy or gap in information these children seemed to believe that hope should be maintained. They responded with comments such as: "We can never really be absolutely sure about whether they returned all of the prisoners." "Some might still be in the South, but they may not have heard of the cease fire." "The Joint Casualty Resolution Center will determine whether my father is alive. I believe he is alive somewhere."

Father's New Image. Following the casualty, during the years of waiting, the children's perceptions of their father and feelings toward him had undergone some evaluation and change. In a few instances, the emotional reactions to father's absence were linked to disquieting memories of father, real or imagined. Some of the children had difficult experiences with their fathers before casualty, and the discussion touched off feelings of guilt, fear, shame or disgust. Sudden outbursts of emotions, of anger and frustration as to "why did he go, he had already been two times before," or "why my father," were intermittently present. For most of the children, the description of their father that they presented to the group was obviously not the father the children once knew, but the glorified parent who is perpetuated in the fantasies of these young adults. It is not uncommon to hear the children speak of their fathers totally in terms of the ideally good, understanding and compassionate father. Their own feelings toward father had become ideally loving and understanding.

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Dreams. Children's dreams about father's absence were seldom mentioned. In those few instances in which they were referred to, the children symbolically described the paradoxical nature of the PW/MIA situation. A twelve-year-old son of an MIA father described a frightening dream of years ago which he had never forgotten. "I dreamed my father returned but he was in two parts; one half was alive and the other half was dead." The dismemberment may have represented the child's ambivalence about the possibility of father's return. Or, perhaps the amount of distortion was related to prior information about the atrocities in Vietnam and was further influenced by the subtle messages that hope must be kept alive, even though father is very likely to be dead. The information from the children's discussions suggested that fantasies of father's return are either more clearly conscious or more readily expressed in adolescence than at younger ages. It seems likely that the children's fantasies of father's return may be a more closely guarded secret in younger children. Wolfenstein (1966) believes that a readiness to admit such fantasies, thus risking confrontation with the facts and reality, may represent one of the many important steps towards accepting the permanence of father's loss or giving up the lost parent.

Self-consciousness. The children appeared deeply self-conscious about having a father missing in the Southeast Asian conflict. Perhaps because the father is felt to be part of each child and an inalienable possession without which the family is incomplete, the children emphasized their need to conceal the fact that their fathers were PWs or missing in action. Although the children were aware that publicity and special recognition accompanied their special status, they also felt a painful inferiority to children with intact families. These feelings were apparently fostered by the public's questionable attitude towards the war. The children made numerous references to verbal insults they received in school. One fourteen-year-old daughter of an MIA father presented an interesting question to the group: "What should I say to a very close friend of mine who was angry at me and told me my father deserved it?"

Emotional Trauma. The experience of having a father missing in action was difficult for all children of MIAs, and exceedingly traumatic for a few. A twenty-year-old girl who sat noticeably quiet throughout the early stages of the discussion, presented her unique experiences. A few months after the report of her father's casualty she found herself experiencing a strong identification with

her absent father. Seemingly in an attempt to keep her father's image in the family, this young lady, who was 15 at the time of casualty, began to wear father-like clothing. Military fatigues and jacket with appropriate patches became her usual daily attire. The loss of her father had meant that she was forced to carry on with her psychological development in the absence of an essential figure, she felt she had to compensate for this loss. As she put it: "I behaved as I thought he would have wanted me to." This led to distortions in development and complications in the resolution of the otherwise normal and typical conflicts of adolescence. Gradually increased depression in this case led to an attempted suicide and subsequent treatment as an in-patient in a military medical center. Her presence in the group and her willingness to share the experience with the group were sincerely appreciated and respected by all and served as testimony of not only the difficulties she experienced, but also of the personal effort she had made to overcome this difficult situation successfully.

Suppressed Emotions. The group experience was charged with emotionality. From the outset, crying, and in some cases sobbing, became a legitimate and accepted way of expressing the pain, frustration and anguish built up over the long period of waiting and hoping. As the children discussed the meaning of the sudden and contagious flood of emotions, it became apparent to the group leaders that suppressed emotions played a unique part in the adjustment of the PW/MIA family. Although the open display of emotions was acceptable in the group, the children expressed the feeling that it was not a generally accepted mode of behavior at home. Crying was not ordinarily tolerated because "I didn't want to upset my mother, she is easily upset." "I was afraid that I would not be able to stop once I started." "I was supposed to be strong and crying meant that I was weak." Suppression of emotions seemed to be one prerequisite for keeping the family on an even keel.

A related topic that was brought out during the discussions of suppressed emotions, was the commonly shared "understanding" within these families that it was dangerous to upset mother. For if upset, mother may break down and cry, may become depressed, or possibly angry at them, and they, the children, may be adversely affected by this. The thing to do, therefore, was to be good to mother and not do anything to upset her, even though it meant sacrifices on their part. Szasz (1959) pointed out the potentially deleterious effect of this very situation and emphasized the child's vulnerability in the family dynamics: "The child, even more than

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the adult is prone to think that if mother is upset, he must have caused it. He is ready to assume responsibility and blame for others' distress" (p. 293). The child, in the absence of father, is even more dependent on the mother's integrated behavior for his own survival and comfort. Hence, he has a pragmatic motive for keeping mother happy. The seriousness of this type of relationship between mother and child was also referred to by Hall and Simmons (1973) in their study of PW/MIA wives. Playing on the children's fears, the mothers were reported to use psychophysiological symptoms and emotional outbursts to control their children. Szasz (1959) indicated that this type of parental behavior was stimulus *par excellence* in developing the child's dread of parental anguish.

RPW Children's Reactions. The eight children of returned prisoners of war who were present in the group struggled with their feelings of discomfort which resulted from being among children whose fathers failed to return. They felt uncomfortable with themselves because of their own good fortune. One young lady was not aware of the basis for her crying and discomfort until well into the meeting. Then, after listening to others, she was able to express what was actually troubling her and what had motivated her to attend. Because of her compassion for the other children, she wanted to share with the others the happiness she felt over her father's return. She prefaced this disclosure by absent-mindedly citing how she too missed her father. The conflict between her past identification with the other members of the group, her desire to continue being part of and accepted by the group, and her altered status due to father's return contributed to her guilt feelings and discomfort. Some support from the other children through their understanding of her dilemma and, at the same time, recognition of her good fortune, appeared to put her feelings of self-worth together once again; although such feelings, it was judged, may resurface from time to time.

Mother's Adjustment. The children who experienced the loss of a father still have one parent. But is the surviving mother an adequate supporter of the children and is she a person to whom the children can transfer the feelings they had for the father? The information gained through the group discussions indicates that the children tend to perceive their relationship with their mother with some ambivalence. Mother represents authority, nurturance, support and foundation for their future. As one child described her mother: "she is not a mother and a father, rather she is a big momma." The children expressed some difficulty in dealing with a single surviving

parent, a parent who is grief-stricken and hypersensitive. From the child's point of view, mother seemed to take little comfort from his presence or his efforts to comfort her. On the other hand, there appeared to be an intensification of positive feelings for the absent father. The absent father was idealized; the surviving mother was placed on trial. The children emphasized the necessity of "keeping hopes alive for father's return". Mothers were expected to conduct themselves in a manner which reflected this hope and commitment to father's return. Any deviation from the norm was suspect and called into question by some of the children. A few children voiced the opinion that it was inconceivable for mother to even entertain the thought of starting a new life for herself and the family - without father. The children's fantasies included the belief that if hope and continued search for father's whereabouts were to be given up, they, as well as their mother, could be blamed for his death.

These feelings, although present, were not uniformly experienced by all the children. Some children, in response to the question of "how is mother doing", were pleased to acknowledge that their mother had begun dating and was starting a new life for herself. They justified mother's actions in terms of her "vanishing youth" and the fact that they, the children, would soon be moving out of the home and starting a life of their own. "Mother should look out for herself." It would appear they felt their future separation from the family was in some way inextricably bound to mother's security and independence. If mother believed father was dead and began dating, it would then be legitimate for the teenage daughter to start her life.

A fifteen-year-old girl took exception to this seemingly mature and understanding approach to mother's dating. Mother's dating was a "cop out" which she (the child) could not understand, but she could tolerate. For this young lady, however, the crusade would continue; she believed that someone in the family must continue to pursue the truth about father's missing status. This was to be her mission in life. Interestingly enough, the group responded to this expression with questions about "her" future and "her" individuality. The other children made the point that her father would have wanted her to develop herself, not design a life around his loss. This presentation of another perspective by her peers was warmly received and acknowledged, although not pursued any further within the context of the group.

Staff Reaction. The staff of ministers, psychologists, social workers, youth counselors and a psychiatrist became totally involved in these

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brief but intense group experiences. Because the staff themselves had experienced a wide range of personal emotions, they were able to relate with empathy and, during subsequent staff meetings, were able to reflect more openly upon their reactions to the children.

Despite the exhaustion and emotional drain felt by most staff members after each group experience with the children, there was a feeling of having accomplished something and of having extended oneself fully to others. Yet, there were also the disquieting feelings of having observed and empathized with severe loss and grief. In almost every staff member, the group experience aroused repressed memories of past personal loss, anxieties, and thoughts of the possibility of future loss of family members. Staff meetings, informal discussions, and independent reflections helped to reconcile the arduous events of each experience.

Summary and Conclusions

In applying Bowlby's (1961) concepts of grieving to these children of fathers missing in action, one may consider the childrens' free expression of their demands for his return to be essential in attaining the conviction that father's loss may in fact be irretrievable. Bowlby has emphasized the therapeutic value of these overt expressions of what he calls "protests" in reaction to father's absence, an awareness which appears to be a prerequisite step towards reality testing and eventual tolerance for accepting the permanence of father-loss.

The denial of the existence of any facts which may suggest the possibility of father's death co-exists with a correct conscious acknowledgement of what may be reality. The children had little difficulty verbalizing that father may not return and even referred to the precarious circumstances surrounding their fathers' casualties. Yet, this superficial deference to facts remained isolated from the persistence on a more emotional level of hopeful expectation of father's return. Both Wolfenstein (1966) and Furman (1964) referred to this process as splitting of the ego in the defense process. Freud (1957) not only acknowledged this defense against accepting an unbearable piece of reality, but also emphasized the commonality of these occurrences in childhood.

The staff was impressed with the similarities in basic feelings and reactions of the children with those presented by their mothers who were interviewed earlier. However, the underlying motivations and feelings appeared to differ. The children's reactions did not appear to be attributable to the grieving process, but rather to the emergence of various struggles with identity formation, interpersonal relationships,

and peer relationships which may be unique to children at different ages. Nagera (1970) emphasized the limited value of making comparisons between the mourning of adults and the mourning of children. He pointed out that, "Many factors contribute to the specific form of 'mourning reactions' observed in children following the loss of important objects. They (the children) vary . . . according to the different levels of development reached in a number of areas of the personality at different ages" (pp. 366-367). His conclusions seem to fit the PW/MIA situation; while adult-child comparisons may show similarities, they should not be misconstrued as identical, nor should it be assumed that identical metapsychological processes underlie the superficial similarities.

Unfortunately, because of the small size of the study sample and the potential of bias in the sample at the religious retreats, it is impossible to make any comparisons based on differences in religious affiliation, education or age. It seemed, however, that the absence of father was an equally difficult experience whether the loss was recent or one of long standing, whether it was sudden or unconsciously expected, or whether mother felt this loss to be permanent or merely temporary.

Although it is necessary to have more complete and clinically quantifiable data gathered on the children to determine whether the reported reactions are predominantly normal or pathological, it appeared that in those situations where child adjustment had been a major difficulty, mothers had taken the appropriate action and sought professional help. The area of more appropriate concern was the mother's ability to cope with her children's responses and needs. In discussions held with all the parents following the children's groups, the mothers indicated this was indeed one of their primary concerns. They worried about how they could help their children adjust to father's absence and, more importantly, how they could help them accept the possibility that father may not return. In the final analysis, this may be the most difficult task of all.

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✓ the others were still waiting. The children whose fathers had not returned indicated several difficult areas of adjustment due to social as well as family responsibilities, conflicts with other children in the school setting, and frustrations over coping with prolonged absence. These children saw their mothers as needing their support and protection, and the prospects of starting a new life without father, the probability of mother dating, and the lessening of hope for father's return were discussed with extreme ambivalence. Advanced maturity and greater sensitivity to other people were perceived by all the children as benefits of their situation. The nature of these reactions and the implications for the long-term adjustment of the children are discussed.



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